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CHAPTER 8

PUBLIC RELATIONS

I. OVERVIEW

The term "public relations" sometimes brings to mind an image of a slick "PR" person promoting a new product or a political candidate. To a program manager or local official charged with administering a local HOME project, it means ***relating to the public***. In the past, Congress and HUD have placed strong emphasis on citizen participation and public relations in federal housing grant programs. This emphasis continues in the HOME Program. Each HOME grantee's community must hold a minimum of one public hearing to encourage meaningful public involvement while completing initial HOME project planning. In the past, some grantees have gone beyond this minimum requirement and conducted community attitude surveys as part of their needs assessment process or held town meetings to solicit citizen comments on community needs. MDOC's interest in involving and informing the public does not stop with the application process. This chapter describes the requirements and obligations of HOME grantees for involving the public during administration and implementation of a HOME project from setup to closeout.

Note: For projects involving funding received from Montana Department of Commerce Housing Division programs, such as the HOME program, grantees must clearly identify the program or programs that are involved, and mention that the Montana Department of Commerce Housing Division administers those programs (see **Exhibit 8-E**).

The Housing Division, including the HOME program, partners with hundreds of entities to help fund housing projects in all areas of the State. The division works hard to publicize the fact that its programs are available to those entities that are looking to develop housing or to persons trying to access housing associated with the division's program. Publications are received from all over the State of Montana and, for the most part, when a project funded by the Housing Division is featured, the programs are clearly identified. However, from time to time, articles are received that either do not mention the funding sources at all or very minimally in generic terms. Therefore, a condition of receiving HOME funding is that all Housing Division programs must be identified whenever a project is publicized.

II. GRANTEE RESPONSIBILITIES

A. INVOLVING THE PUBLIC

There is an understandable tendency for the local officials and staff of any community to get involved in the day-to-day details of administering their HOME project. It is easy to forget the importance of keeping local citizens up-to-date on progress and developments in the program. Each grantee should endeavor to keep the public informed about the project as it proceeds from the original idea to the finished dwelling.

By keeping people informed, other goals related to the project can be more easily accomplished. For example, in a housing rehabilitation project, continued publicity assists in marketing the program and communicates the message to citizens that help is available to improve their homes. In some projects, even with HOME-funded assistance, there may be an increase in the overall housing costs to the tenants or occupants. Continued publicity regarding the project helps local citizens understand why these costs must go up and allows the public to feel like part of the process rather than just the receiving end of a higher bill. Publicity also keeps citizens informed about the complex issues that their local governments are facing in trying to provide adequate housing for low- and very low-income families.

Publicity about a HOME project can also be used to generate enthusiasm about the community and long-term goals to improve the city, town, or neighborhood.

B. INFORMING CITIZENS

Publicity efforts do not have to be highly sophisticated to be effective. Publicity and citizen participation efforts are effective when tailored to the unique characteristics and situations of each community.

One approach used in many communities is to have the program manager provide progress reports to the grantee's governing board at least monthly. Then, the program manager provides a copy of the progress report to the local newspaper(s) or radio station(s) for air time exposure.

Another option is to have the program manager or members of the governing board make brief presentations to local civic groups or service organizations to update them on project progress. A slide presentation, for example, is a very effective way to show the impact of a local HOME project for housing rehabilitation, where the change in the physical appearance of homes before and after rehabilitation is graphically displayed.

C. WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Many communities with excellent projects in other grant programs have never received full and due credit because local officials or staff expected the media to hear about their community efforts and publicize their activities. Recognition of grant programs seldom occurs unless local officials and/or program managers take action to inform the citizens about the project. If the media takes an interest in the HOME project, a much larger audience will gain knowledge and interest in the project. Reporters and editors quite naturally look for good feature ideas, especially if they have assistance in developing the story as a feature rather than as a "press release."

If possible, arrange to allow the local newspaper to provide coverage of any major meeting or event regarding the project. This will help keep citizens up-to-date on new developments. The program manager or the chief elected official can also contact the local newspaper to periodically brief the editor or reporters on the status of the community's HOME project.

If involved in preparing a press release or participating in an interview about the project, remember to mention that HOME funds helped to finance the project. This brings awareness to other communities that the Montana HOME Program is a potential player in solving housing problems, and informs citizens on the use of a portion of their federal tax dollars.

A local radio talk show or call-in program might be an effective way for a program manager or local official to spread the word about their HOME project. These types of programs welcome the introduction of new material, particularly if it is of general interest to the public or of a public service nature. The program manager or local official can assist the interviewer by preparing a list of proposed questions in advance.

Make every reasonable effort to accommodate the media staff. Determine the deadlines and schedules that local newspaper or radio/television stations follow. Avoid asking for story coverage right before an impending deadline. For example, weekly newspapers typically experience one especially hectic day each week before going to press. Find out what day that is, and try to schedule any special events or meetings to avoid it in order to provide the media agency with adequate time to incorporate informative and complete news about the project activity.

For a special event or meeting, prepare clear, concise background information for reporters. Reporters may be unfamiliar with the issues of concern related to the project, and often cannot perform background research before impending media deadlines. If a reporter would like specific information concerning the statewide HOME Program, contact the HOME Program office and staff will provide the information requested.

Check with the local newspaper about acceptance of project photographs, including digital images. If the newspaper accepts prints, identify the kind of film or prints required. Newspapers prefer shots that include an activity or an object telling a story, rather than group pictures of smiling faces. Where a group is photographed, try to limit the number of people photographed to three or less. In addition, it is helpful to accurately identify the names and titles of all the people included in the photograph. Ask permission of those in the photo to use them and their name. Then make sure that everyone's name is spelled correctly!

Develop a story that focuses on the people who benefit from the program. See **Exhibit 8-A** for an example of an effective human-interest story regarding a HOME Program project.

D. PRESS RELEASES

Press releases are used primarily for special events or new developments, and not for routine events. If press releases are used repeatedly for routine information, the target audience tends to ignore them. Below are several suggestions for preparing effective press releases:

- ✓ The lead (first) paragraph should single out the answer to at least two of the five "W's": *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*. The remainder of the "W's" should be

answered in the second paragraph. Try to limit the lead paragraph to no more than four lines. Begin the release with an eye-catching quote or key statement about the special event. Use present tense, and avoid vague terms like "today" (the press release may be printed "tomorrow").

- ✓ Place the most important information at the beginning, in prioritized order, so the story can be cut from the end without sacrificing the essence of the story. Provide background information on the issue, if necessary.
- ✓ If possible, limit releases to one page in length. Keep it short and simple. Press releases should be typed and double-spaced, single side only.
- ✓ In preparing a press release for a radio station or newspaper, include the name and telephone number of a knowledgeable contact person in your organization. Newspapers and radio stations rarely use a press release without performing some modifications to the original text. The contact person (local official or program manager) must be able to answer additional questions or clarify key points about the HOME program. Including a contact person provides the local official or program manager with an opportunity to elaborate on the release or to emphasize important aspects of the story to the media representative.
- ✓ Plan ahead! Do not expect the news media to take a last minute press release request and deliver adequate coverage. Distribute the press release far enough in advance to allow the news media to plan. Personally delivering press releases to reporters and other media contacts with whom you have prior working relationships will help ensure coverage of your event. Give your media contacts plenty of time to develop a story. Identifying project recipients to be interviewed will assist the media in putting a human face to your project's story.

Exhibit 8-B is a sample format for preparing a press or news release. There are many variations on the theme, and creativity is certainly an asset. See **Exhibit 8-C** for an example of an eye-catching news release.

E. PROGRAM SIGNS

A long-standing requirement for many federally assisted programs, particularly those involving construction, is for the community to erect a sign on or near the project site. The project sign contains information describing the purpose of the project and the various funding sources. Although project signs are not specifically required at present by HOME regulations, the idea makes sense and contributes to the cultivation of effective public relations. Federal agencies such as the Economic Development Administration (EDA) or the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) require that bid specifications contain construction details for project signs, including dimensions, size and type of lettering, and color of paint. For example, the EDA requires an eye-catching red, white, and blue scheme for lettering.

Again, the MDOC does not require the use of project signs. However, the MDOC does encourage the use of signs to garner publicity for the project and the funding sources. Project publicity can energize local citizens and encourage involvement in the project. A well-done project sign can help generate enthusiasm for the project and provide a sense of forward direction in the community or neighborhood.

Like other aspects of publicity for a local HOME project, a project sign does not have to be professionally manufactured to be effective. The standard elements for inclusion in project signs are shown in **Exhibit 8-D, Sample Project Sign Format**.

F. SPECIAL EVENTS

Special events, such as recognition for the first home rehabilitated through a housing rehabilitation project, are useful in communicating neighborhood happenings to citizens and in generating enthusiasm. Many communities hold a "Community Development Week," during which activities like a local spring "clean up" or beautification campaign are conducted to enhance the appearance of the community.

During any special event, the mayor, county commissioners, or other project official should (if feasible) invite the governor, state legislators, and/or members of Montana's congressional delegation to participate in a ribbon-cutting ceremony or a tour of the project. Montana's U.S. representative and senators need to know what Montana communities are accomplishing with HOME funds.

G. OTHER PUBLICITY TOOLS

1. Brochures. Brochures are an excellent informational tool, provided they are kept short and to the point. Housing rehabilitation program managers routinely use brochures to briefly describe the local program guidelines and provide contacts for additional information. An advantage of using brochures is the ability to target the information to specific households or neighborhoods through door-to-door distributions or mailings.
2. Newsletters. While most local projects are probably not large enough to justify developing a newsletter for a specific HOME project, it is possible to utilize other community newsletters (such as those published by local churches or the county extension agent) as a means of informing the public about the local HOME project.
3. Posters. Posters are routinely used for publicizing local activities, special events, or public meetings. Effective posters are neat, attractive, and sized to match the available space on a bulletin board or a storefront window. Posters are normally displayed for one or two weeks; if posted longer there is a tendency for citizens to ignore them. Posters are inexpensive and versatile by their suitability for placement at town halls, banks, grocery stores, welfare offices, churches, senior centers, libraries, and laundromats; wherever the

public has a chance to read the message. Obtain permission from the business or agency before displaying the posters.

H. RESOLVING COMPLAINTS

A discussion of public relations is not complete without mentioning the grantee's responsibilities for dealing with complaints. Though local officials have their community's best interests in mind when implementing a HOME project, there will be a citizen or group of citizens who, at some time, will express dissatisfaction with a particular aspect of the project. For example, in a housing rehabilitation project, a homeowner may have a dispute with a contractor over the quality of the work done on his or her home.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, local citizens have the right to offer their views at any point during the development and implementation of a HOME project. Any comment, suggestion, criticism, or complaint made by a citizen should be taken very seriously and given a prompt response. Amendments to the federal *Housing and Community Development Act* passed in December 1987 require a *timely written answer to written complaints and grievances, within 14 days where practicable*. While this 14-day requirement is targeted specifically toward the CDBG Program, it makes sense to adopt the same requirement for the HOME Program. Telephoned or oral complaints also deserve a prompt response.

As a general rule, once a complaint is filed, local officials or program managers should immediately investigate the basis for the complaint and work to produce a reasonable solution or response. The citizen (or citizens) lodging the complaint feel ignored if the community does not respond with at least an immediate telephone call to begin investigation into the situation. The longer the time before citizens are contacted, the greater will be their frustration or anger. The maximum time specified by Congress for a response (14 days) suggests that Congress understands the repercussions resulting from slow responses to citizen complaints.

If a citizen does not receive a quick and adequate response from the grantee, the usual pattern is that the next complaint will be lodged with the MDOC, the governor, HUD, or a member of Montana's congressional delegation. If a complaint of this type is filed, the complaint will be referred back to local officials for a response. The MDOC will not dictate to local officials the form or manner of the response. The MDOC HOME staff is available to advise the community regarding any federal or state requirement that may be relevant to the question at hand. When the grantee has reached a decision on how to resolve the complaint, the MDOC will communicate the local government's decision to the agency or office that originally referred the complaint to MDOC for action.

CHAPTER 8

EXHIBITS

- 8-A Sample Newspaper Human Interest Article
- 8-B Sample Format for a News Release
- 8-C Sample Press Release
- 8-D Sample Project Sign Format
- 8-E Memo from Housing Division Administrator RE: Project Public Relations